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ABSTRACT

Building a strong college debate program begins in the classroom where the coach can help young people engage in comprehensive research of contemporary findings, integrate the findings into meaningful analysis, develop argumentative skills, think on their feet, and do the best job of debating possible. A coach must also communicate to debaters that while the skills and techniques developed in college should not fall into disrepair, graduation is the time when educational debate is finished, the game is over. In addition to teaching ethics as criteria for debate, a coach can impart a philosophy of ethics that can be applied to the real world concerning one's sense of duty and obligation toward himself or herself as well as to others, to know as much of the truth as can be discerned, to seek arguments in defense of propositions that will lead to the harmonious satisfaction of human wants and needs, and to meet the tests of logical adequacy. Speakers must learn to study their relationships with their audience, assume responsbility for what they advised, welcome diversity of opinion, and not justify the means by the goal. (TJ)

"Ethics and Forensics"

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"Ethics and Forensics"

Several years ago Merwyn Hayes, then Director of Forensics at Wake Forest University, and his seven-year old son Stephen were on a flight to Atlanta. Seated across the aisle from Stephen was a little girl his age. Seeking to impress this fair maiden, he announced proudly, "My Dad's a debate coach." This was probably Stephen's first setback in the art of courting. This is my first year as a debate coach and I, too, have discovered that none of the girls my age are impressed either.

The question I want to consider this afternoon is neither "should little girls be impressed by debate coaches?" nor "should anyone else be impressed?", but are we ourselves aware of the significance of our roles as debate coaches? I believe we should recognize the importance of what we can accomplish in directing a forensics program, and as such I believe the consideration of others ultimately forms the center of a forensics program. I have taken the liberty of narrowing forensics to debate. Granted the topic may seem old hat and predictably open to cliche's, but as a rookie coach, I've found the hours I've pondered this topic worthwhile. I want to share my thoughts with those coaches who periodically reassess their own code of ethics, those coaches who ought to do so, and those individuals who someday hope to direct a forensics program.

What should one set out to accomplish as a debate coach? Or,

what do our chairmen, our colleagues and our students expect from us? Either conciously or subconciously, my chairman expects me to function as an effective administrator, that is, I am to make the most out of my budget, account for each dollar and every mile. My chairman and my colleagues expect me to teach argumentation skills as well as administrate. Intercollegiate debate is an academic exercise and students must learn debate theory and develop their skills. And finally, my chairman, my colleagues and my students all expect me to coach a winner as well as administrate and teach. And rightly so. Our teams are expected to be competitive. The desire to achieve, to succeed, to win is possessed by all healthy persons. If we are truthful I think everyone in this room would admit that more often than not, the greatest pressure to win comes from within ourselves. Surely no chairman or college president has ever demanded that your teams win every round of debate and the NDT each year in order to appease the alumni. I may be wrong but I doubt that any debater ever complained that the team's won-loss record jeopardized his chances to go high in the pro draft. How does one go about building a strong debate program? Whether or not one enjoys the benefits of scholarships to recruit capable students, the task begins in the classroom. We can help the young person to engage in comprehensive research of contemporary problems, to integrate his findings and observations into meaningful analysis, to develop the argumentative skills either to defend his own position or refute that of his opponents, to think on his feet, to communicate his ideas more effectively, and, ever mindful of judging tastes and biases, to do the best job of debating possible.

The coach further instructs his young people to attempt all this within the ethical framework outlined in the Statement of Principles established by the American Forensic Association.

This past summer I attended a national workshop where each day the coaches discussed topics of concern before the assembled college debaters. Our goal of providing clash on these topics sometimes resulted in one's having to play devil's advocate. On one occasion I was delighted to defend the proposition that a coach should approach debate at all times as a learning experience, teaching argumentation skills within the philosophy that winning isn't everything. The students nodded and voiced their agreement. The following day it fell my lot to recant my position, admit "having seen the light" and argue it was the coach's duty to do all things in his power, ethical or otherwise, to help his debaters win as often as possible. Fully expecting my audience to laugh at my overly-dramatic 180° shift, I was surprised to observe the students calmly digest my comments, nod in agreement and voice their approval. The conclusion you draw from this narrative may differ from my own, but I contend that we must never take for granted the power of our influence afforded us by our almost tutorial relationship with our debaters. Even our jesting may be persuasive.

Relax. It is not my intention to rant and rave about the villainous standards and practices of my colleagues. Permit me two observations here. First, call me naive if you will, but while we may lack unanimity on what is or is not ethical in debate, I do not believe any coach would actually teach what he considered to be unethical techniques in order to increase his team's chances for victory. Second, I'm just as sure that a coach would put a stop to

any such practices he might discover developing on his squad. (Look for audience response)

To administrate, to teach and to coach within a framework of established principles, is that all that is expected from us? No, I think not. I believe we must communicate to our young men and women that when they graduate, to paraphrase Paul's advice to the Corinthians, the time has come to put away childish things. We must convince them that while many of the skills and techniques developed in four years of intercollegiate debating should be practiced so as never to fall into disrepair, the time for educational debate is finished. The time has come to stop playing a game.

"Perhaps the greatest number of consistent conclusions among all empirical studies of debate is to be found in the area of personality correlates with skill in debate"[1] In general:

1. debaters have a greater need to be recognized as a success by doing things better than do nondebaters,

2. debaters are less willing to accept criticism and blame than nondebaters,

3. debaters desire greater control and influence over others than do nondebaters,

4. successful debaters seem to value friendship less than nondebaters,

5. debaters like competition more than nondebaters,

6. debaters feel less of a need to assist and care for others than nondebaters,

7. and, nondebate audiences perceive debaters as better speakers than nondebaters but also "feel that the debaters are somehow being unfair," that is, their speaking sacrifices "content to

form and that it does not reflect what (they) really believe."[2] As McGlone points out these findings do not establish that all debaters have these characteristics, that these qualities are bad, or that a casual link exists between these characteristics and debate.[3] The shortcomings of empirical research dealing with debaters and personality characteristics does not encourage us to place great value to their results. But, for speculation sake let's keep them in the backs of our minds.

Studies also indicate that college debaters are among the brightest and most diligent members of their class. We point with pride to the number of ex-debaters who succeed on local, regional, and national levels of business and politics. Some have even served as president. We are all aware of the Harris and Roper polls, letters to the editor, man-on-the-street interviews and countless dreary conversations that the public's trust in local, regional, and national business and political leaders is eroding. I am not mad enough to suggest a causal link for this erosion of public faith with intercollegiate debate, but I do wonder about the influence of those weekend warriors who have never quit playing the game--who have never forgotten the tournament wisdom "if you can't beat them with logic, dazzle them with bullshit."

In addition to teaching established criteria of ethics for intercollegiate forensics, I intend to use my opportunity as a coach to impart a philosophy of ethics to my people which they can carry with them to the real world.

In attempting to articulate a personal code of ethics concerned with one's sense of duty and obligation toward himself as well as others, I turn, as have many of you, to Karl Wallace who reasoned

that "communication inevitably must reflect the same ethical values as the political society of which it is a part."[4] According to Stanley Rives the ideal behind our democratic society requires recognition of at least three essential values: "truth, human welfare, and rationality." That is, the speaker has the obligation to "know as much of the truth as can be discerned," to "seek arguments in defense of propositions which will lead to the harmonious satisfaction of human wants and needs," and to meet the "tests of logical adequacy."[5]

To fulfill these obligations the speaker must study carefully his relationship with his audience. This is true particularly of the college debaters who may be prone to overlook the wide gulf existing between tournament judges and the great American listener. I believe that my students will bridge this gap if I can make them aware of their part in what Wallace preferred to call the Adviser-Advisee relationship inherent in a democratic society.

Wallace believed that an audience always has the last choice in a rhetorical situation, that is, to either accept or reject the speaker's proposition. However, the speaker generally possesses a greater knowledge of the topic and controls the nature, amount and manner in which information and arguments are presented.[6] Wallace argued that if rhetoric was considered an art of advising it would insure a sense of rationality for both speaker and listener and both would be more apt to recognize their obligation to each other. A speaker accepting the responsibilities of an adviser elevates his social concern over his personal motives. In so doing he attempts to improve his knowledge and judgemental abilities, is sensitive to the climate for giving advice, and respects his auditor's ability to reason.

I would like to point out several of the many advantages to approaching the audience-speaker relationship in this manner.

First, the speaker would assume responsibility for what he advises and be better able to judge his own integrity when recommending a course of action.

Second, the speaker would welcome diversity of opinion. According to Lee Huebner, former college debater and Nixon speechwriter, " . . . even as the persuader works to achieve a general conclusion, he also respects every man's right to reach an independent conclusion. He responds to public opinion without capitulating to them; he organizes opinion, but does not use force. A system of persuasion and counter-persuasion is the only way in which a democratic society can make decisions. For it is the only way we can achieve consensus without violating consent."[8] Incidentally, Huebner resigned shortly after the Watergate break burglary.

And third, this approach provides a response to the "cult of success in American life." Wallace feared the tendency to justify the means by the goal and believed any theory of persuasion "which calls for a man's always hitting his mark and losing success and prestiege if he doesn't"[9] to be indefensible. Ultimately, success or failure is found in a speaker's faith "in the intelligence of an informed public."[10] Reflecting on his college debate career Huebner observes, "I have often felt that so many fine people have allowed their own self-appraisals to be governed so completely by their success in winning tournaments and trophies. I think of able debaters and coaches like whose values and judgements and behavior have been distorted by this superficial test of proficiency."[11]

In drawing to a close, I think each one of us needs to remember that the debate coach or better debate adviser can offer the most meaningful and lasting impression on the life of a debater. As part of that relationship I think it essential for us to advise our young people of their responsibilities when the game ends. Whether or not our chairmen, colleagues, or even our students expect this from us, this is what we should expect of ourselves. As Waldo Braden observed, "We must be more than teachers of how-to-do-it. We must be teachers of attitudes and ethics."[12]

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[1]Edward L. McGlone, "Current Practices and Attitudes in Debate," in Directing Forensics: Debate and Contest Speakering by Don F. Faules and Richard D. Rieke (Scranton: International Textbook Company, 1968), p. 330.

[2]McGlone, pp. 331-2, and John R. Stewart and Jerrold J. Merchant, "Perceived Differences Between Debaters and Non-Debaters," JAFA, VI (Spring, 1969), 72.

[3]McGlone, 332.

[4]Karl R. Wallace, "An Ethical Basis of Communication," Speech Teacher, IV (January, 1955), 5.

[5]Stanley G. Rives, "Ethical Argumentation," JAFA, I (September, 1964), 79-85.

[6]Karl Wallace, Understanding Discourse: The Speech Act and Rhetorical Action (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1970), pp. 94-5.

[7]Wallace, "Rhetoric and Advising," SSJ, XXIX (Summer, 1964), 285.

[8]Lee W. Huebner, "The Debater, The Speechwriter and the Challenge of Public Persuasion," JAFA, VII (Winter, 1970), 7.

[9]Wallace, "The Field of Speech, 1953: An Overview," QJS, XL (April, 1954), 128.

[10]Huebner, 7.

[11]Huebner, 5.

[12]Waldo W. Braden, "What can be done by Teachers of Speech to Preserve Freedom of Speech: A Symposium," SSJ, XIX (May, 1954), 335.